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SUBJECT: OBASANJO WEAKENED BY THIRD TERM DEFEAT BUT STILL
STRONG

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for Reasons 1.4 (b
and d)

¶1. SUMMARY: The recent tussle over constitutional amendments stirred up Nigerian politics and has had repercussions far beyond the National Assembly debates. While President Obasanjo never publicly endorsed the effort, he was reportedly personally involved in its failed prosecution. On the domestic stage, he has become the thing he most wanted to avoid - a lame duck president. On the international stage, as well, his prestige and influence have also likely suffered. The most important question for Nigeria's future, though, is what impact this will have on governability issues in the next year. While it seems that Obasanjo will be unable to dominate the political landscape, his influence remains strong in several areas. Although major policy initiatives are almost certain to be postponed, the President's ability to manage Nigeria's day-to-day activities will likely remain intact. END SUMMARY.

¶2. The recent tussle over constitutional amendments stirred up Nigerian politics and has had repercussions far beyond the National Assembly debates. The various political parties are now engaged in redefining themselves (septel). With the registration of several new parties backed by important political players, the outcome of the realignment will remain murky for some time. Among themselves, Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, Vice President Atiku Abubakar, Chukwuemeka Ojukwu and others have been talking, but relationships among them are in flux. While Atiku and Buhari obviously want the Presidency, Ojukwu appears determined to play kingmaker within the group. And while many look to Babangida as the obvious choice for heir apparent, he seemingly remains reluctant to submit himself to the rigors of a political campaign. It is clear, though, that recent events and continuing political jockeying have a direct impact on President Obasanjo and his ability to govern.

¶3. President Obasanjo was careful to never publicly endorse efforts to amend the Constitution. And when queried on his desire for a third term, he generally hedged his response, saying only that he would not violate the Constitution. Reports of his direct interference in the process and directives to his operatives were elements of an aggressive effort to ensure passage of the amendments, however, and politicians and the general public firmly believe that he managed the attempt personally. As he attempts to serve out his remaining year in office, Obasanjo is saddled with the perception that he invested large amounts of money and much personal effort and yet came up short.

DOMESTIC ISSUES

¶4. President Obasanjo is generally believed to have supported this third term initiative for one of two reasons: a desire to continue, or a desire to remain strong late into his current term of office. Since the President himself never committed to staying on, his interest in extending his term is a matter for speculation. It is obvious that, whether he wanted it or not, the term extension was dealt a serious blow. On the purported desire to remain strong late into his term, Obasanjo was fairly successful. Questions about the legitimacy of his second election arose soon after the dust had settled in 2003. At about the same time, his public approval ratings went into freefall, recently dipping below twenty percent. In that environment, Obasanjo's influence could have slipped early in the term. Instead, he has been able to install his handpicked candidates in INEC and the executive of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) over all opposition. He has also been able to embark on his economic reform program, including NEEDS and SEEDS and banking sector reform, to great international acclaim. Can he continue? As a "lame-duck President," especially in a culture that respects authority only when it appears unassailable, he is likely to face challenges to his supremacy. Any domestic policies that have not been firmly embedded in the political culture before are less likely to gain approval now.

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

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¶5. On the international stage, as well, President Obasanjo's prestige and influence have also likely suffered. While the past several years has seen Obasanjo respond to demands of the international community to respond to major crises throughout Africa, including the ongoing crisis in Darfur, Obasanjo's failed attempts at third term invitations to continue as African Union President and as Nigeria's President could serve to embolden his critics on the continent. In the best of times, Obasanjo earned a great deal of resentment from other African leaders, a result of his blunt style as well as a latent distrust of Nigeria, the largest African state, evident throughout the continent. ECOWAS has even shown the temerity to weigh in on Nigerian issues with its comments on term limits and the crisis in Nigeria's Delta region, topics it would not have touched only two years ago. While Obasanjo will likely be able to garner support among African Heads of State, his style will have to change. The amount of funding that Nigeria traditionally provides for African institutions will help him to leverage his influence, but with his diminished aura, the President will have to work harder for consensus.

GOVERNABILITY OF NIGERIA

¶6. Perhaps the most important question for Nigeria's future, though, is what impact this will have on governability issues in the next year. President Obasanjo's mandate is at an all time low and with his temporary disinterest and, perhaps, disorientation in his previously familiar political landscape, his opponents will be watching carefully to see how he deals with the ongoing civil unrest in the Delta, the Middle Belt, the East and the North and the major cities. Obasanjo seems to have no clear policy goals for the next year other than "preserving his reforms." In this political environment, it would be difficult for him to embark on major initiatives. While publicly, many will continue to extol the virtues of his reform program, few Nigerians take them seriously and political opportunists, sensing his weakness,

are discussing attacks on what many perceive as his program on enrichment for his own personal clique including a possible impeachment effort aimed at his mishandling of resources and flouting of court orders.

17. Given this environment, Obasanjo will be unable to dominate the political landscape as he has in the past several years. Still, his influence remains strong in several areas, including security. Even while the Nigerian police force is under attack from the high level of criminality throughout the country and by civil society for human rights abuses and extortion along the highways, the service remains loyal. However, the rank and file are suffering in the same fashion as most of Nigeria's working class and the seventy percent of the population under- or unemployed. While more tenuous, his control of the military appears intact as well. Nominally, Obasanjo has been able to appoint the military leadership, many of the officers remain loyal to their godfathers, both in and out of the military. The influence of popular retired generals such as Babangida, Danjuma and Buhari cannot be discounted. Still, unless another major setback occurs or he makes a strategic blunder in his efforts to either extend his term or install an unpopular successor, Obasanjo is unlikely to face an open challenge from either group.

BOTTOM LINE

18. Although any major policy initiatives are almost certain to be postponed, the President's ability to manage Nigeria's day-to-day activities will likely remain intact. Serious challenges are not evident at this time, with most political operatives content to wait for the outcome of the elections. Should he choose to take the high road, President Obasanjo could still manage an election substantially better than the 1999 and 2003 efforts, cementing his reputation as a "democrat." And should he choose to open the political system to all interested parties, Nigerians could have the chance in 2007 to actually influence the choice of their nation's leadership for the next term.
FUREY